

# **THE ART OF FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY**

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**A mini-thesis submitted towards the subject  
Visual Communications III**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Introduction	vi
<b>1. THE FOOD PHOTOGRAPHER</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. The Food Studio	1
1.1.1. Lighting and Equipment	2
1.1.2. The Background	3
1.1.3. The Kitchen Area	3
1.1.4. The Props	3
1.1.4.1. Kitchen Props	
1.1.4.2. “Pure” Props	
1.1.4.3. “Fake” Props	
1.1.5. Garnishes	4
1.1.6. The People Assisting the Food Photographer	4
1.1.7. How to Go About Photographing Food	5
1.1.8. The Client’s Specifications	5
1.2. Photographing on Location	5
1.2.1. Available Light	6
1.2.2. Contrast	6
1.2.3. The Direction of Light	7
1.2.3.1. Light from Above	
1.2.3.2. 45-Degree Light	
1.2.3.3. Sidelight	
1.2.3.4. Back Lighting	
1.2.4. Creating the Correct Mood for a Photograph	7
1.2.5. Digital Manipulation	8
1.3. Conclusion	8

## 2. THE AUTHOR'S WORK 9

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2.1.	Smoked Trout	9
	<i>The Image</i>	10
2.1.1.	Diagram of Smoked Trout	11
2.2.	Mussels and Bread	12
	<i>The Image</i>	13
2.2.1.	Diagram of Smoked Trout	14
2.3.	Silver Plum	15
	<i>The Image</i>	16
2.3.1.	Diagram of Silver Plum	17
2.4.	Dark Roast Coffee Beans	18
	<i>The Image</i>	19
2.4.1.	Diagram of Dark Roast Coffee Beans	20
2.5.	Colourful Mugs	21
	<i>The Image</i>	22
2.5.1.	Diagram of Colourful Mugs	23
2.6.	Young Berry Liqueur	24
	<i>The Image</i>	25
2.6.1.	Diagram of Young Berry Liqueur	26
2.7.	French Salad	27
	<i>The Image</i>	28
2.7.1.	Diagram of French Salad	29
2.8.	Broken Eggshells	30
	<i>The Image</i>	31
2.8.1.	Diagram of Broken Eggshells	32
2.9.	Peppadew	33
	<i>The Image</i>	34
2.9.1.	Diagram of Peppadew	35

3.	<b><u>APPENDIX A</u></b>	<b>36</b>
4.	<b><u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u></b>	<b>40</b>

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# INTRODUCTION

*"Light is the most important person in the picture"*

- Claude Monet

Light, to a photographer, is the medium used to create with. It is the palette with which the photographer mixes colour and tones to create an image. This applies as much to food photography as to any other field of photography.

In this mini-thesis the reader will be led into the world of food photography and he/she will be introduced to the food photographer and the way he/she has to go about creating a food photograph. The reader will take a "walk" through the food studio, where the cameras and lighting equipment will be explained. A "visit" to the all important kitchen area will then commence and the way prop's and garnishes are used, will be laid out. The final "ingredients" of the food photograph will then be added. These are the mood of the photograph and the option to photograph on location. The above will be shown by examples of the author's own work, as well as examples from other food photographers. The author's work will be discussed and a detailed lay out will be given of how a specific photograph was produced.

Finally, the interaction between photographer and client will be discussed. This is a very important part of food photography, as it is a more commercial field of photography and the relationship between the client and the photographer plays an immense role in the success of the food photographer. With this in mind, let us begin the tour...





# **CHAPTER 1**

## **The Food Photographer**

Photographing food requires a well thought-through plan of how to photograph the product, so that it looks as tasteful and attractive as it possibly can. Perfectionism is practically a necessity and the food photographer has to have a sound grasp of composition and the technical competence for accurately capturing colour. Together with this one has to consider the quality of the image as far as the grain and texture goes. The best cameras to photograph food with are usually large format cameras, such as the 4x5 camera. Using these cameras ensures good quality images.

There are several problems with which the food photographer can come in contact with and some of these are:

- Making a delicious tasting, yet unappetizing-looking image, look appetizing,
- Having to photograph a dull-looking dish.

You can however overcome problems like the above, by using creativity to make these dishes look “absolutely delicious”, or you could work around the problem by using ingredients as the main focusing point of the image, thus showing the image from a different perspective. Another way to overcome these problems is to create the “lifestyle” look, thus working around the dish itself and concentrating on conveying a feeling of the type of lifestyle that the dish suits best (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 14) or is usually associated with.

### **1.1. The Food Studio:**

Generally, a food studio does not have to be that large, because the subject one is photographing is not that large. This, however, does not apply if one

is more inclined to do “lifestyle” photographs. For these kind of images, a larger studio is needed. The obvious necessity in a food studio is the preparation area. Here the food will be prepared and styled for the photograph. One would, from time to time, have to create a location feeling in the studio and this has to be done with careful planning (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 14)

### **1.1.1 Lighting and Equipment:**

Concerning lighting for the food photographer, electronic flash is usually the best choice. Continuous lighting gets too hot and the food can melt, dry out, wilt, etc. One positive point of continuous lighting though, is the fact that it creates a feeling of warmth and warmth is almost always a successful addition to a food photograph.

Warmth can be created by using warming filters (81-series), or placing yellow, orange or amber filters in front of the lights themselves. The food photographer does not really need a large quantity of lighting equipment, but one must at least have four heads, soft boxes, snoots, barn doors, honeycombs and focusing and projection spots. The amount of heads used can be limited by using reflectors, small mirrors, etc.(Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 14)

Cameras used by the food photographer are mostly the large format cameras, such as the 4x5 inch camera and 8x10 inch camera. These cameras allow for more camera movement and greater quality regarding the film and grain of the film. These cameras also force the photographer to spend more time than usual with the composition of an image, because of the amount of time it takes to set it up correctly and the time it takes to focus the image the way desired. The 6x7 inch camera is a more mobile



camera and is optimal for location photographs, because it still gives greater quality than the 35mm camera.

The films that are best to use are 100 ASA, 125 ASA or 50 ASA films. These films give sharper, clearer images, with little grain, compared to 400 ASA film.

#### **1.1.2. The Background:**

The background is only a subtle part of the food image, yet it is very important. The food photographer has to make sure that the background enhances the image, but not overpower it. Wood is often a good idea, as is stone, but the photographer has to decide what background goes optimally with a particular image (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 15)

#### **1.1.3. The Kitchen Area:**

The kitchen area in the food photographers studio has to be exceptionally well-equipped. One needs a large refrigerator and a large freezer, two or three ovens and at least one microwave-oven. Apart from this, one has to shop around for photogenic ingredients. This would require traveling around for interesting, attractive-looking ingredients. Photographers in the city might find this easier than photographers in the country (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 14)

#### **1.1.4. The Props:**

The food photographer needs props to enhance the image. These are a necessity and can be divided into four groups, namely kitchen props, “pure” props and “fake” props.

#### 1.1.4.1. Kitchen Props:

These include crockery, cutlery, cutting boards, baskets and bowls to hold the food.

#### 1.1.4.2. “Pure” Props:

These are used in “Neo-Japanese” or “Hi-Tech” styles. It includes using flowers or other objects which are attractive in their own right, but which are not directly related to the subject one is photographing.

#### 1.1.4.3. “Fake” Props:

These include objects that make the food look more convincing. For example, glass marbles are used to bulk out soup or stews that are too deep in a pan or bowl. Fake ice can be used to substitute the real thing. Some photographers use cigarette smoke to create the steam effect and they use glycerine to make food look more juicy.

These are a few of the techniques that can be used to enhance food, but it is obvious that modern day food photographers are more and more telling it as it is, thus not using any fake accessories to enhance the appearance of food (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 15)

#### 1.1.5. Garnishes:

Garnishes can actually be placed under props, because they are so closely related.

Garnishes are used to make the food look attractive and can fill-up dull areas of monotonous texture and colour. Garnishes are also used to cover up flaws, such as a small crack in the plate, a missing piece of the crust of a pie or a bad place on a fruit or vegetable (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 15)

#### **1.1.6. The People Assisting the Food Photographer:**

A food photographer often needs help when photographing. It is virtually impossible for the photographer to do everything on his/her own. The most important person helping is of course the food stylist. The food stylist has to style food attractively and be aware of any flaws that the food might have. The ideal number of people working on a food photograph is three. The photographer, the stylist and the photographer's assistant. Working alone is possible when one is photographing food that can stand for more than ten minutes without spoiling, but this is not always the case (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 : 15)

#### **1.1.7. How To Go About Photographing Food:**

One begins by gathering and setting up the props, as well as gathering the ingredients, etc.. Then one starts with setting up the lights. The lighting setup can be done with something that replaces the food. The ideal is to prepare two dishes of the same food, and to do the setup photograph with Polaroid (testing the image is a very important component) using the one dish, thus analyzing the image and making the necessary changes and then doing the actual photograph with the other dish (Hicks & Schultz, 1994 :15)

#### **1.1.8. The Client's Specifications:**

As a food photographer one usually has to work with people who will specify what they want and how they want it. The client's ideas have to be taken seriously. Usually the client has a food stylist working for him/her. This food stylist tends to know exactly what the client wants and is there to ensure that you take the image according to the brief. This can put limitations on the photographers creativity, but it can happen that the photographer's ideas are the ones that the client eventually settles at. The food photographer, or any photographer working for clients for that matter,

has to remember the client's specifications and work with them to create a successful image (Joel, 1990 : 48)

## **1.2. Photographing on Location:**

Photographing on location is something every food photographer will have to do some or other time during his/her career. This is especially necessary when doing "lifestyle" photographs as discussed earlier. When doing a location photograph one has to create a definite mood. This can be done by simply using the available light, or if necessary, fill-in light.

(see Appendix A)

### **1.2.1. Available Light:**

*"I define available light as any light I can get my hands on, any light that's available"*

- *W. Eugene Smith*

Working with available light could mean the photographer is "shooting" in sunny conditions, rainy conditions or shady conditions, or he/she could be using artificial light that isn't supplied by the himself/herself (Jacobs, 1991:14)

Some types of available light are almost guaranteed to make better photographs than others. Side lighting, for instance, can enhance the form and texture of an object, while front lighting tends to flatten natural forms. The kinds of light that show a subject best, are called pictorial lighting (Jacobs, 1991 : 18). The photographer can decide which type of lighting suits the subject best. Just photographing at a different time of day can make an immense difference to the mood and effectiveness of an image.



When photographing in natural light one has to watch the location to determine when the light is optimal. Once this is determined, the photographer can start planning the photograph. As mentioned under the discussion of equipment, a 6x7 inch camera would be the best choice when photographing on location, because of the detail one still retains with the medium format cameras. Test “shots” are, as always, something that the food photographer cannot leave out. This is done with Polaroid film. Once the photographer is satisfied with the setting, he/she can commence to take the photograph (Joel, 1990 : 50).

### **1.2.2. Contrast:**

When photographing in severe contrast conditions (e.g. black object against white background), the overriding of the exposure reading on the meter is sometimes necessary. This depends on whether the photographer wants more detail in the light or dark areas. In doing this, the photographer has to realise that the loss of detail in one of the areas is inevitable. With underexposure one loses shadow detail, and overexposure results in the loss of highlight detail (Jacobs, 1991 : 54).

### **1.2.3. The Direction of Light:**

Light illuminates a subject, and by its direction, intensity and colour temperature, creates the mood of a photograph (Jacobs, 1991 : 62) There is a number of directions and the photographer can use each one to his/her advantage:

#### **1.2.3.1. Light from Above:**

Shadows are the key to lighting direction, and often is the way to good photographs. Shadows from top light help show off forms and textures, and they offer visual accents (Jacobs, 1991 : 66)

#### 1.2.3.2. 45 -Degree Light:

This direction of light can be used for strong scenic pictures. The pictorial impact varies as light and shadows change (Jacobs, 1991 : 68)

#### 1.2.3.3. Sidelight:

Sidelight is often the most dramatic angle of light. It is the most useful type of light when texture is important. The shadows given off by the subject are what show the relief of the surface or the distinctive characteristics of its shape (Jacobs, 1991 : 70)

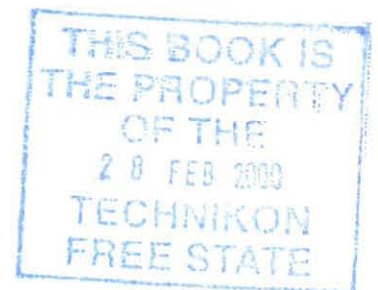
#### 1.2.3.4. Back Lighting:

Back light can be used accentuate a subject, and make it look more appetizing. It helps to separate the subject from the background and add emphasis to the subject (Jacobs, 1991 : 72)

### **1.2.4. Creating the Correct Mood for a Specific Photograph:**

Creating the correct mood for a photograph is essential. Without mood a photograph cannot touch the viewer. One must be careful, though, as not to convey the wrong mood for particular photograph.

When one sets up the photograph, one must determine what kind of mood one wants to convey. Is it romantic, elegant, modern? Once this is determined the photographer must make sure that the props he/she is using creates the mood he/she wants. The mood, though, does not solely depend on the props, but on the kind of lighting used as well. When one uses soft light a romantic feeling comes across, when using harsher light one can convey a more modern feeling. The use of “gels” can also add to the mood of a photograph. These have to be used carefully, though, because they can become a dominant colour and that is not always a good thing. A “gel”





should be used subtle to ensure the mood is captured (Joel, 1990 : 66) (See Appendix A)

#### **1.2.5. Digital Manipulation:**

An image can also be changed to the photographers specific needs with digital imaging. This is an easy, reliable way of creating a interesting, creative image. Changes can be made by adding filters to images and changing the colour balance. Unwanted elements can also be effectively removed. A photograph can either be scanned onto a optical disc with a scanner, or be taken directly with a digital camera or digital back.

### **1.3. CONCLUSION FOR THIS CHAPTER**

The above are guidelines to successful food photography and a explanation of how a food photographer should approach the subject. In Appendix A examples of the images of Seth Joel, is shown to demonstrate the above mentioned guidelines and rules. The next chapter introduces the author's work and how the author went about producing the images.

## **CHAPTER 2**

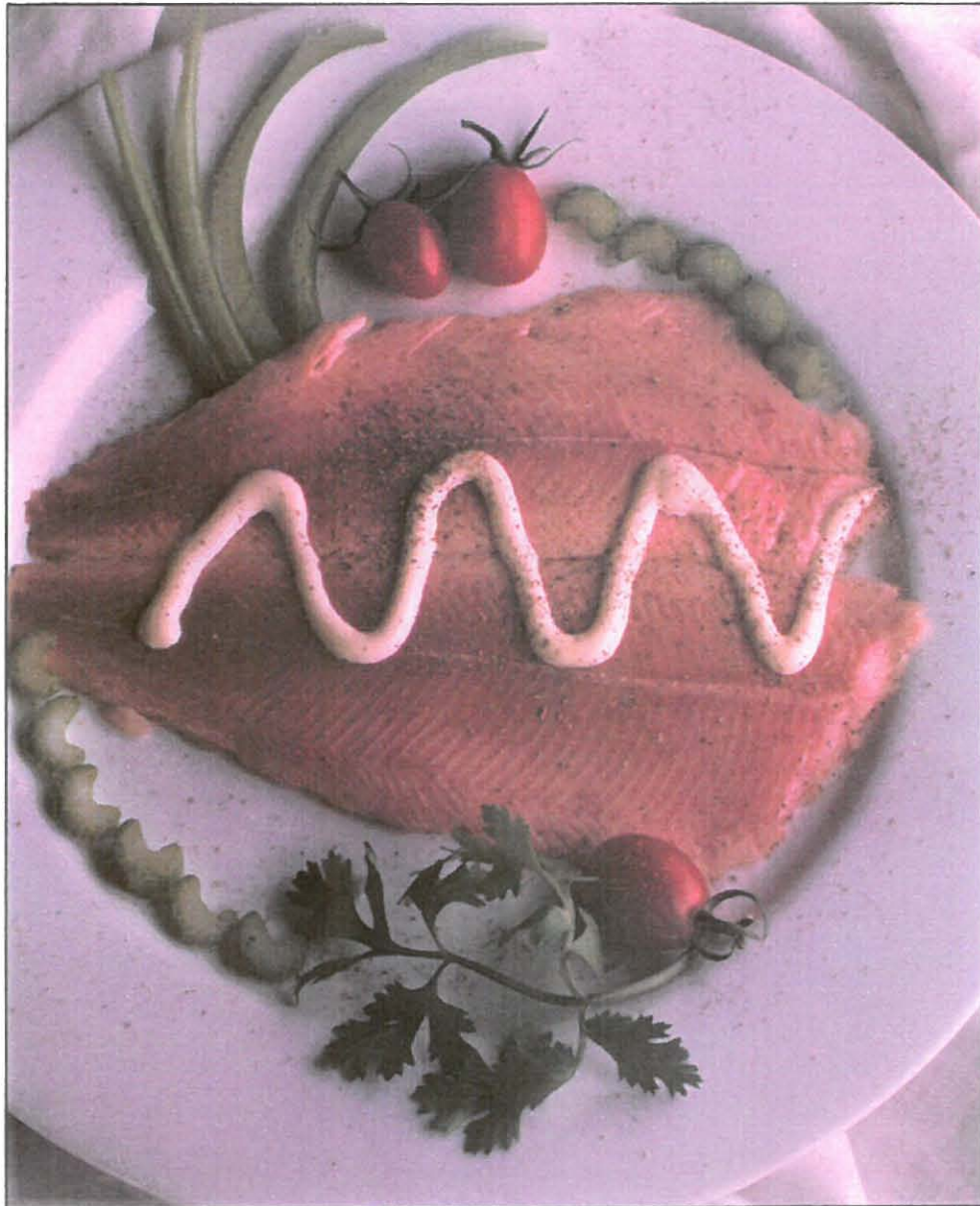
### **The Author's Work**

In this chapter the author's photographs will be discussed. The discussion will cover nine images, substantiated with diagrams of the studio setup and the photograph itself. Influences and inspiration will also be shared.

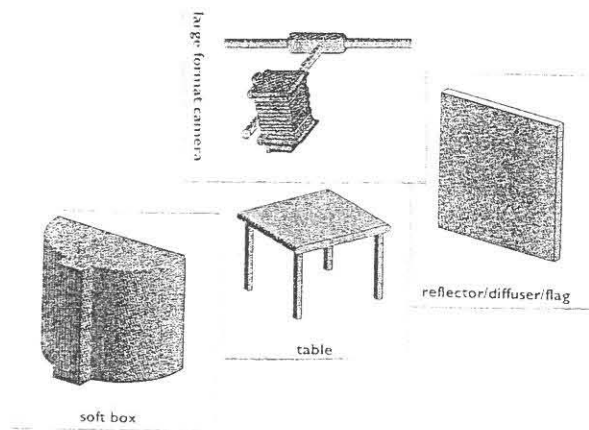
#### **2.1. SMOKED TROUT:**

In planning and doing this image, the author had to bear in mind that a stylish look was to be created. This was achieved by using garnishes in such a manner as to enhance the mood of elegance and style. Everything was carefully placed on the plate, nothing was randomly thrown together. The white of the plate and the white of the tablecloth also adds to the mood.

The film format used is 4x5 colour slide film from Fuji (RDP II). Using this film ensured a good quality photograph colour-wise and detail-wise. Fuji film is preferred because of its rich colours and great detail. In taking the photograph the camera was placed above the subject, in order to achieve a straight forward view of the plate. When the image was lighted, the following was done: In order to create a soft, elegant look, the light was diffused. This was done by using a soft box from the one side and a white reflector from the other. This ensured the even, soft lighting.



### 2.1.1. DIAGRAM OF SMOKED TROUT:

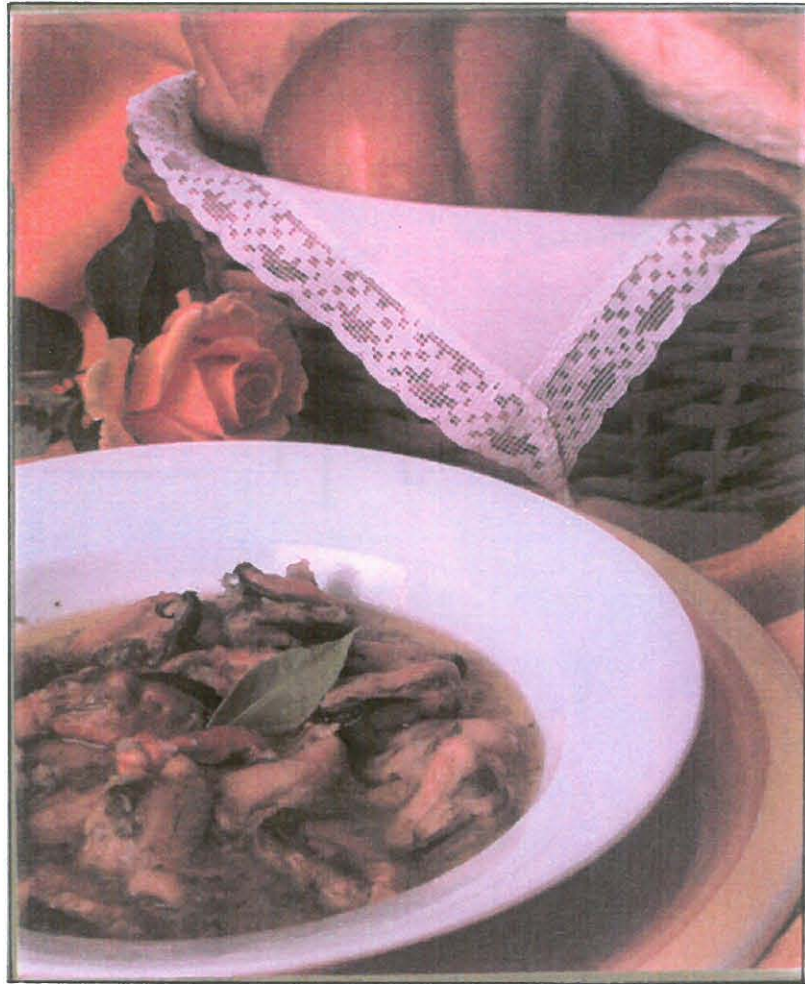


## **2.2. MUSSELS AND BREAD:**

The mood conveyed in this image is one of warmth and hospitality. This was created by using the same orange colour throughout the image. The colour is repeated in the mussels, the tablecloth and the bottom plate. In addition to this, a breadbasket with bread rolls was placed in the background to enhance the mood. Another “prop” is the yellow rose. This was placed down as to hide an unwanted open space, and in turn repeat the colour again. The use of the colour accentuates the mussels.

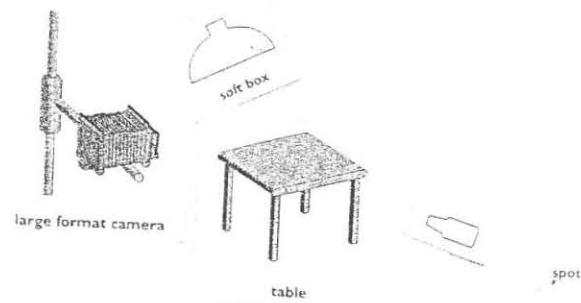
Fuji RDP II in 4x5 format colour slide film is used. This ensured a good quality image, where colour and detail is concerned. The image was lit by using a soft box from the side and a spotlight highlighted the mussels. The camera was situated in front and at a slight angle.







### 2.2.1. DIAGRAM OF MUSSELS AND BREAD:



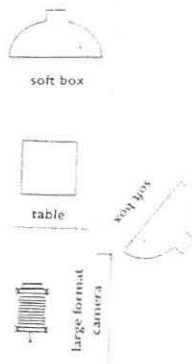
### **2.3. SILVER PLUM:**

In this image the author played with the colours silver and the deep red of the plum. Grapes have been sprayed silver and placed on a plate (also sprayed silver). This gave an overall silvery feel. Compositionally the plums were placed as to accentuate them. They are much larger than the grapes and their colour draws attention to them.

Fuji RDP II 4x5 colour slide film is used, as to ensure an overall good quality image. Where lighting is concerned a soft box from above was used as to eliminate harsh shadows and highlights. A smaller soft box is also used from almost in front, but slightly to the side. This ensured an evenly lit, clean mood, that enhances the silver.



### 2.3.1. DIAGRAM OF SILVER AND PLUM:



#### **2.4. DARK ROAST COFFEE BEANS.**

In creating this image the author wanted to convey the feeling of the brown darkness of the coffee beans. This is emphasized with the use of brown paper, that was crumpled and placed down as a table cover. Shallow depth of field ensure that only selective parts of the image is in focus. These are some of the coffee beans and the words “Dark Roast” on the bag of coffee. The colours in the bag of coffee ensures that the overall brown feeling in the image is broken, and this adds a little bit of contrast.

The negative point in this image is the way the eye skips around between the bag of coffee and the in-focus coffee beans in front.

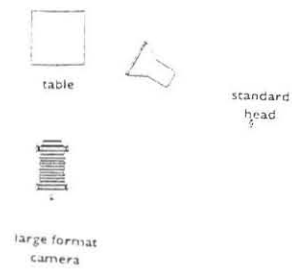
This image was photographed on Agfa 4x5 100 ASA colour slide film, which ensured a good quality slide. One standard light was used from the right front side of the image. This created a dark mood, with shadows and highlighted the bag of coffee just enough for the viewer to see the words written on it.

Due to technical problems this image cannot be shown.





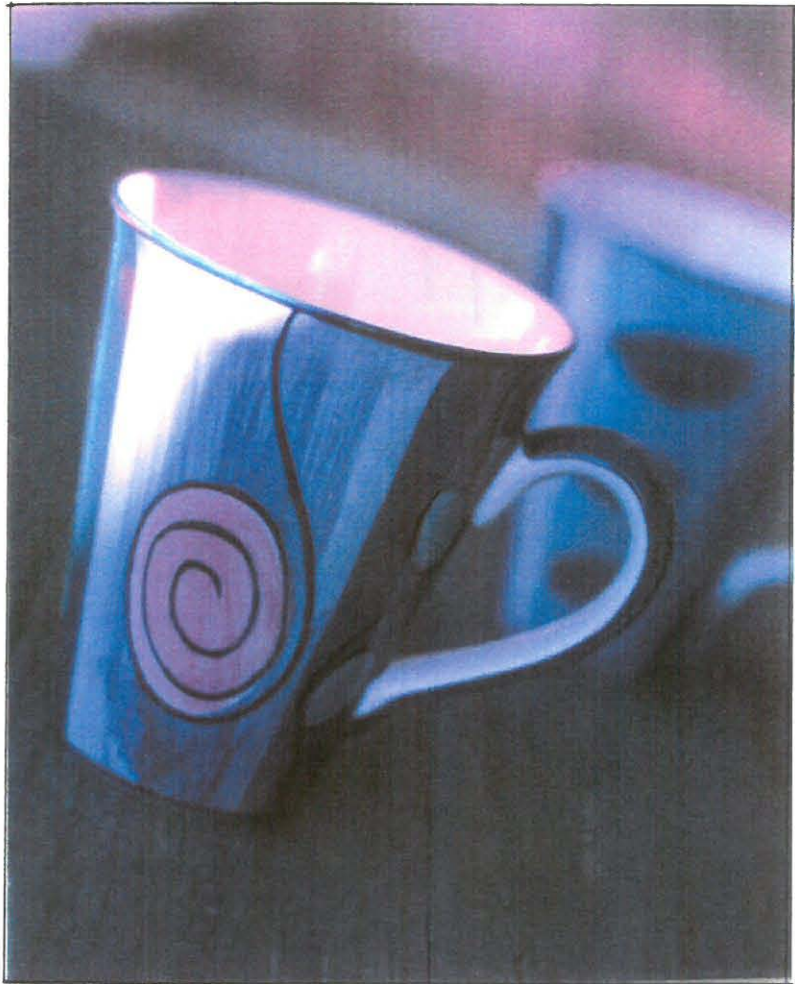
#### 2.4.1. DIAGRAM OF DARK ROASTED COFFEE BEANS:



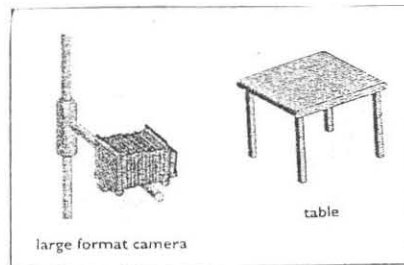
## **2.5. COLOURFULL MUGS:**

With this image the author wanted to create a feeling of home. The two mugs were placed behind on another, slightly to the side and the camera was tilted to the right to create an interesting angle. The mug at the back is out of focus and this places the emphasis on the mug in the front. The viewer can still recognize the mug in the background though. The colours of the mugs are emphasized by the colour of the table which is a deep sea green. As it is a wooden table, the viewer can see a bit of the natural colour of the wood coming through.

This image was taken in natural light at about four p.m., on 100 ASA Fuji Quick Load 4x5 slide film.



### 2.5.1. DIAGRAM OF COLOURFULL MUGS:



## **2.6. YOUNG BERRY LIQUEUR:**

This image is more about the product, than it is about a certain type of food. The young berry liqueur is enhanced by the placing of the young berries around the bottle and in the glass. The green of the door in the background, balances the green on the label of the bottle. The same applies to the red of the young berries and the red on the label of the bottle. The background is out of focus as not to disturb the viewer and take the emphasis off the bottle. The overall mood of the photograph is one of a commercial value more than it is one of aesthetic value.

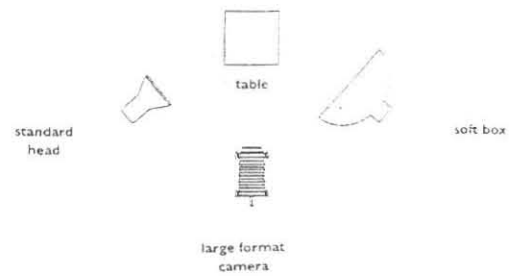
The film used is 4x5 Fuji RDP II 100 ASA colour slide film. Using this film ensured the good quality in sharpness the image has. The lighting used was as follows:

A standard light was placed on the left side to serve as the main light source used. A soft box was used from the right front side of the image to eliminate harsh shadows and reflections.





### 2.6.1. DIAGRAM OF YOUNG BERRY LIQUEUR:



## **2.7. FRENCH SALAD:**

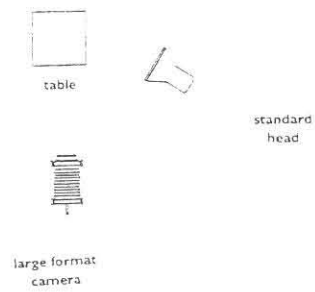
The image is of a French salad in a green bowl. The overall mood the author wanted was one that would convey the freshness of the salad, as well as a feel of the Mediterranean. The salad is in the front of the image, dominating it. The salad dressing in the background is there to enhance the mood of the image. The colour green is also used repeatedly in the bowl and in the door.

The lighting used was as follows:

One light was placed from the right side, half to the front of the subject. This resulted in the shadow one can see in the background. The film used was 4x5 Fuji RDP II 100 ASA colour slide film. The negative point in this image is the labels on the bottles. They are not the main focus point of the image, but they are in focus and there is a shadow on the Garlic Salad Dressing bottle. This bothers, because the viewer can't read what is written on the label. For advertising purposes this would not work, and the author should have used bottles without labels or should have used shallow depth of field.



## 2.7. DIAGRAM OF FREN



## **2.8. BROKEN EGGSHELLS.**

This image was more a different approach to photographing food. The author used broken eggshells and placed them on homemade paper with flowers embedded in the paper. The colour of the eggshells and the colours in the paper enhanced each other and a overall soft pastel colour mood was created.

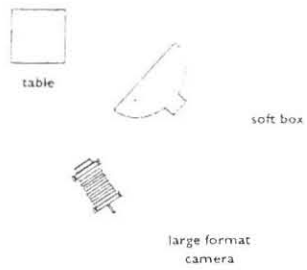
One soft box was used to create a soft feeling, with soft shadows. The film used was 4x5 Fuji 100 ASA colour negative film. The negative point in this image is the fact that the eggshells are not neatly broken and they have jagged edges.







### 2.8.1. DIAGRAM OF BROKEN EGG SHELLS:



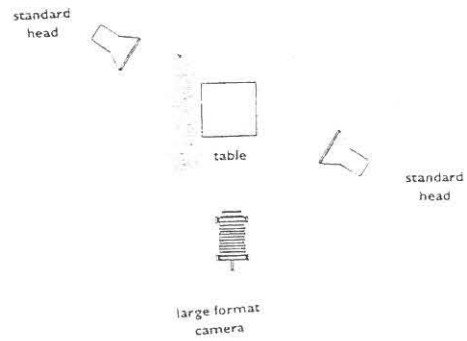
## **2.9. PEPPADEW:**

This again is an image that is more concerned with the advertising of the product, than the aesthetic beauty of it. The image is of a bottle of “Peppadew” (these are sun dried peppers in olive oil). There are peppers in the background (red, green and yellow), and one yellow pepper was cut into slices and placed in front of the bottle to add to the composition. The image is very colourful, in that the photographer used a blue cover on the table, the green door as a background colour and placed yellow and red “gels” on the lights to add more colour. A modern, colourful, lively mood is obtained.

The film used is 4x5 Fuji RDP II 100 ASA colour slide film and the lighting was two standard lights, one from the front to the right side of the product and one from slightly to the back at the left side of the image.



### 2.9.1. DIAGRAM OF PEPPADEW:





## APPENDIX A

### IMAGES OF SETH JOEL:

#### Images of “shooting” on location





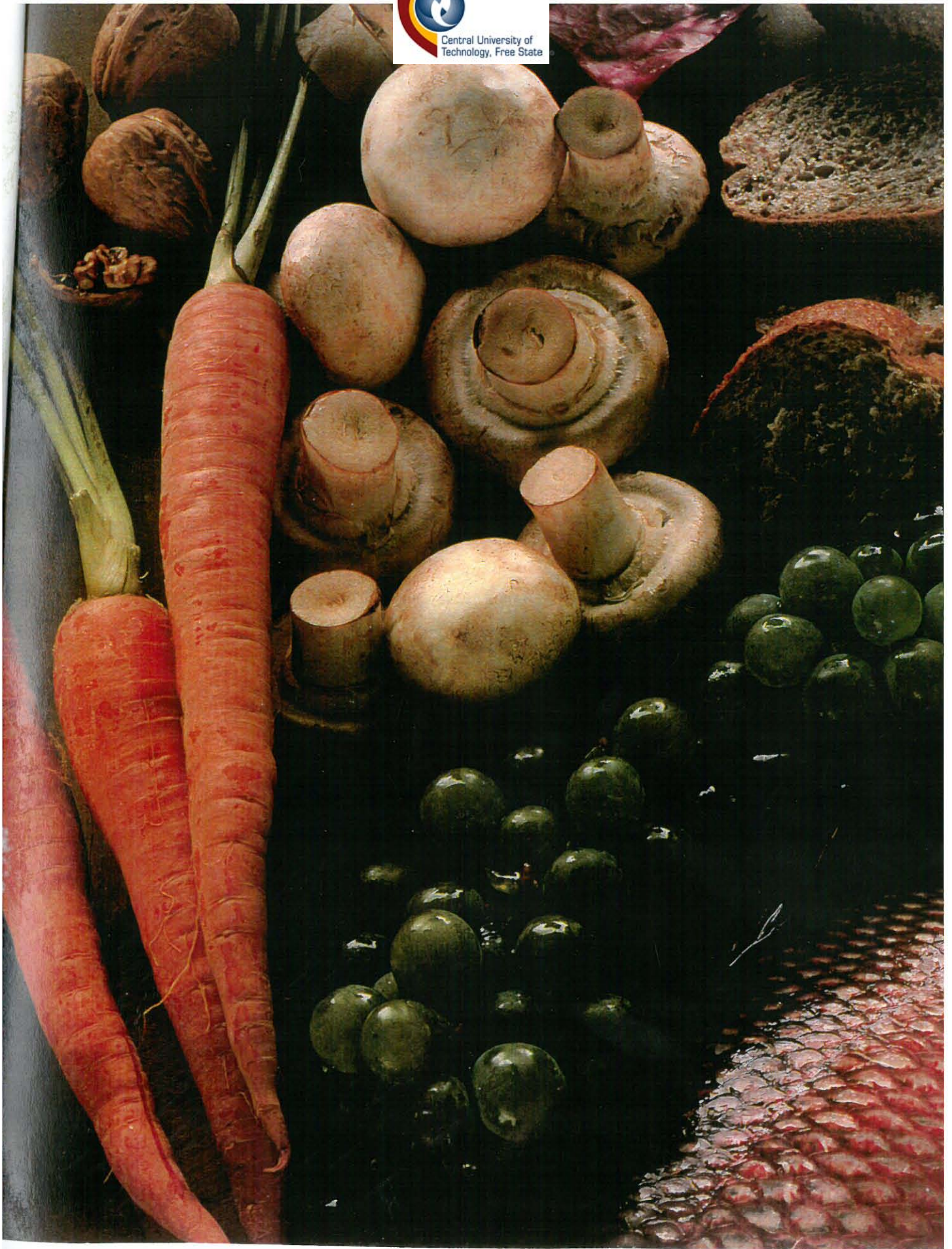




### Images of Creating the Correct Mood for a Photograph







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